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What we do today will define tomorrow

After every cataclysmic event one tends to think that the world will never be the same. This time it is true that in certain ways the world must change. Global history is laden with such turning points almost all being painful. For years we have been warned that a pandemic could be that cataclysmic. The section of humanity that live amidst raging wars, crises, endemic fragility, state collapse, and human misery could be pardoned for thinking that it could not be worse. Those living in peaceful, prosperous regions could think that nothing could harm them and that they were destined to remain lucky. Yet a pandemic is what it is; no society, no individual can hope to be outside the reach of a deadly virus. We thus distance ourselves from the others, from the blessings of social interactions. Infections have reached all continents except Antarctica, numbers race towards half a million and will surely surpass it, more than a third of humanity is ordered to stay home, and all those lives we have already lost in shocking numbers will be joined by scores of others. The economic toll of this pandemic will also be daunting and can be long term. The impact on existing state fragilities, on politics and security will surely encumber governments around the world. We have yet to see the light at the end of this tunnel and we cannot wait for it. It is a moment of reflection but also leadership and action.

The global system was in tatters even before humanity was struck by the coronavirus. Turkey for one had been making the case that we needed to reform the system. We called it "the world is larger than five" agenda, referring to the outdated composition of the UN Security Council but not stopping there. As a country that had to address unending conflicts and human misery in our close neighbourhood and home to largest refugee population in the world, we have known that the system was not working. In 2008 when the world was struck, that time by the economic pandemic, the G20 was able to bring a sense of direction and thus stability to the faltering world economy. The system had worked then but thanks in large degree to a relatively new global actor. We must brace for a similar massive economic impact this time around as well and make sure that the system works even as we make the necessary patches and replacements.

The top priority is to protect the health and safety of people from COVID-19. We support the timely G20 statement through which the leaders committed to act in solidarity in the fight against the pandemic and safeguard the global economy and unrestricted trade. The extension of SWAP agreements have been among significant measures agreed by the G20. We are happy that our proposal to form a Senior Officials Coordination Group was embraced by the G20 as we need to coordinate closely on issues such as border management and repatriation of citizens. I thank Canada for presenting initial ideas on its modalities. G20 is proving again to be the right format in global crisis management.

A number of countries are also taking strong individual measures, Turkey included. However, individual efforts would not suffice. A global challenge requires a global response, first on the public health front and then in the economy, and over the long haul in reforming international institutions and the way countries support them. The relevant international institutions should assume an effective role in financial and medical equipment assistance. Protection of fragile communities, irregular migrants and refugees, and support to host countries are even more important now. Global supply networks and cargo transfers must run unhindered. Sanctions as a blunt policy tool must be evaluated from the humanitarian point of view. Many sanctions, including those against Iran hurt only the Iranian people but also their neighbours. At a time of a pandemic this risk is even higher. Developing and least developed countries, notably in Africa must not be left behind.

A cross cutting theme in the much-needed global response is ending the conflicts that exact very heavy toll on the humans, ecosystem, economy and our conscience. We therefore call on the international community to step down in all conflicts, cease hostilities, and search earnestly for dialogue and reconciliation including in the Middle East. Geopolitical competitions and political grievances make little sense when the world is fighting for its very health and know that everyone suffers. This call cannot go unheeded if we all take a moment to support it worldwide.

This generation of leaders are in fact defining the future of the world order by the decisions they take today with regard to the pandemic. The seeds we sow today will soon confront us as full blown realities. The reality of a rules-based global system, a network of functioning nation states that are resilient and accountable, economies that leave no one behind and benefit all, supported by fit-for-purpose international organizations, all focusing on the well-being of the people irrespective of their nationality, faith or race can be within reach. Because the alternative quests are not meaningful even harmful to the common good. And thus there may be an upside legacy of this pandemic, notwithstanding all the pain it has been causing, if we all choose to make it happen. Stay home and safe.

Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu is the foreign minister of Turkey.